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DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Washington, D.C. 20520

February 16, 1978

Dear Mr. Chairman:

Secretary Vance has asked me to respond to your letter of February 2 requesting the Department's detailed comments on a memorandum prepared by the American-Israeli Public Affairs Committee concerning the proposed sale of sixty F-15 aircraft to Saudi Arabia.

Our comments on a number of the points in the AIPAC memorandum are attached. I would, however, like to make some general observations. First, as you know, this Administration has pursued peace in the Middle East with a scrupulous care for Israel's security. The Secretary's announcement of February 14 on the sale of aircraft to several Middle East countries gave particular prominence to this point. In particular, as the Secretary stated, the aircraft sales recently approved by the President -- including the sale of F-15's to Saudi Arabia -- will not alter the basic military balance in the Middle East.

Secondly, as the Secretary also noted, the aircraft sale in question will be consistent with the overriding objective of a just and lasting peace.

Finally, we regard the sale of F-15's to Saudi Arabia as meeting the legitimate requirement of Saudi Arabia to modernize its air defenses. In this connection, it is relevant to stress the immense importance of Saudi Arabia in promoting a moderate and responsible course both in Middle East regional development, including peacemaking, and in international economic and financial affairs.

Sincerely,

Douglas J. Bennet, Jr.
Assistant Secretary for
Congressional Relations

Enclosure:

Comments on AIPAC memorandum

The Honorable
Lee H. Hamilton,
Chairman,
Subcommittee on Europe and
the Middle East,
Committee on International Relations,
House of Representatives.

Comments on AIPAC Memorandum in Response to a Request of Congressman Hamilton, Chairman, Subcommittee on Europe and the Middle East, Committee on International Relations

THE AIRCRAFT

AIPAC Memorandum

"... the F-15 is armed with short-range heat-seeking AIM-9L Sidewinder air-to-air missiles ... (and) ... can carry up to 12,000 pounds of external air-to-ground ordnance, reportedly without sacrificing its air-to-air capabilities ..."

Department of State Comments

The Saudi Air Force is not scheduled to get the AIM-9L all-aspect Sidewinder missile which will be carried on USAF F-15s. The AIM-9J which the Saudi Air Force currently has on its F-5 aircraft would be used on the F-15s along with the radar guided AIM-7F.

Although manufacturer's specifications state the F-15 can carry up to 12,000 pounds of external air-to-ground ordnance, the US Air Force version is currently certified to carry a maximum of three 2,000-lb. bombs on three "hard points". Modification of the F-15 to permit carrying additional ordnance is a highly complex undertaking which would require US approval and assistance. The plane's hard points are also used to hang external fuel tanks; using them for bomb loads limits the aircraft range and time on station in an air defense role.

SAUDI MILITARY STRENGTH

AIPAC Memorandum

"Purchases of more than $12 billion in the last four years have made Saudi Arabia a fourth confrontation state on Israel's borders. The Saudis are acquiring 110 US F-5E fighters, 550 French and American tanks, 6,000 anti-tank missiles and three mobile SAM systems. The Saudis are building up a total military infrastructure to base, maintain and operate a major military force.

"... For mobile air defense, the Saudis have bought the American Improved Hawk, the British Rapier and the French Shahine (Crotale) SAM missiles.

"For naval operations, the Saudis have ordered guided missile boats, patrol ships, attack craft, hovercraft and frigates ..."

Department of State Comments

Foreign Military Sales to Saudi Arabia through September 30, 1977 totalled $15 billion. Of this amount only $1.2 billion has been spent on weapons and munitions. The balance has been for supporting equipment and services, including $6.2 billion for construction contracts managed by the Corps of Engineers. Most of the financing for construction has gone to private contractors, many of whom are not US firms.

Saudi Arabia shares no land borders with Israel and is not a "fourth confrontation state;" has not participated in any significant way in military operations in past Arab-Israeli wars; and its leaders have emphasized they have no aggressive intentions toward any state in the area.

Saudi Arabia has the smallest armed force of any major state in the Middle East, whereas it has to defend an area as large as the US east of the Mississippi.

The F-15 would modernize the Saudi air defense capability. Their aging British Lightning interceptors will be phased out over the next several years. The F-15s, like the Lightnings, have a secondary air-to-ground capability but both are primarily interceptor aircraft with an air defense mission.

Saudi army tanks and antitank inventories are modest compared to those of other Middle Eastern states. The number of AMX-30 and M-60 tanks the Saudis have purchased is considerably less than the AIPAC figures.

While the I-Hawk is inherently mobile, the Saudis have set up their batteries in fixed installations to protect vital areas.

Rapier and Crotale are both short-range SAMs for close-in defense of deployed ground forces. The Saudis have no Rapier and only limited quantities of Crotale on order.

The Saudi Navy, when modernized, will have patrol boats. It will not have hovercraft or frigates.

Even after the completion of the current military modernization program, the Saudis will have no more than

100,000 men under arms. (58,000 Army; 3,000 Navy; 12,000 Air Force; 26,000 National Guard.)

Saudi modernization plans include development of certain basic infrastructure taken for granted by many nations but still lacking in Saudi Arabia.

THE EFFECT OF AN F-15 SALE

AIPAC Memorandum

"Sale of F-15s will mean a tripling of Saudi air strength compared with 1973. The F-15s firepower and payload will mean a dramatic qualitative increase in Saudi strength. An F-15 sale will require that the US sell the Saudis advanced airborne radar systems such as the E-2C or E-3A (AWACS). The presence of so advanced a weapons system on Israel's borders will not enhance Saudi Arabia security. Instead it will make Saudi participation in a future Arab conflict with Israel more likely."

"... The F-15 is more difficult to maintain than the F-5. In fact, the USAF continues to rely heavily on McDonnell technicians to maintain its own F-15s. Thus there would be considerable involvement of private US personnel in Saudi combat support who would not be subject to control by the US Government."

Department of State Comments

In 1973 the Saudis had 70 combat aircraft (37 Lightnings, 20 F-5s and 13 F-86s).. The F-86s have been phased out and the Lightnings will be phased out over the next several years. Thirty additional F-5s were delivered in 1974 and 64 more F-5s, ordered in 1975 and 1976, will be delivered through The Saudi goal is to have 167 combat aircraft consisting of 107 F-5s and 60 F-15s by the mid-1980s. Most of Saudi Arabia's neighbors are expected to have larger combat aircraft inventories in the 1980s.

An F-15 sale will not lead to the sale of the E2C or E3A. The F-15 has an excellent radar. Were the Saudis to purchase an aircraft with a less effective radar than the F-15, they would be more likely to seek an airborne radar system. The Saudis have expressed no interest in either the E2C or AWACs.

Past history would indicate that, in the event of renewed Arab-Israeli hostilities, the Saudis are unlikely to participate in combat to any significant degree. To use their interceptor aircraft against Israel would strip them of their first line of air defense and lay them open to retaliation. The F-15 is an air superiority fighter, not primarily designed for ground strikes. If the Saudis were interested in attaining a capability for striking Israeli targets, they would presumably be seeking attack aircraft such as the Jaguar, Mirage F-1 or F-16.

The F-15 is easier to maintain than the Lightning interceptor currently in the Saudi Air Force because the F-15 has modular units which can be replaced without extensive technical capability.

The US Air Force does not utilize McDonnell technicians to maintain the F-15s. The only McDonnell personnel on a USAF F-15 base are a few technical representatives normally assigned to monitor weapons systems status and provide specialized assistance. The same eventually would be true for the Saudis F-15s.

US contractor personnel are prohibited by law from providing technical support in time of war. The Saudis are fully aware of this prohibition.

INVOLVEMENT IN FUTURE CONFLICT

AIPAC Memorandum

"The presence of F-15s in Saudi Arabia would almost make certain direct Saudi involvement in any future Arab-Israel war.

"...Saudi F-15s would pose a threat to the survivability of the Hawkeye airborne early warning and control system on which Israel now depends heavily and force the diversion of Israeli F-15s from other tasks to expand the combat air patrol dedicated to defending the Hawkeye."

Department of State Comments

Saudi acquisition of 60 F-15s would not alter the basic Middle East arms balance. Fundamental inhibitions which have led Saudi Arabia to refrain from combat with Israel in past conflicts would still pertain. It is questionable that Israel would feel compelled to undertake a pre-emptive

strike against Saudi Arabia because of Saudi possession of the F-15. Such strikes have not been undertaken by Israel against Iraq or Libya in past conflicts, for example, although their arsenals include advanced Soviet aircraft. While F-15 sales will increase Saudi defensive capability, Israeli military planning and force disposition are unlikely to be greatly affected.

Israel does not depend heavily on the E-2C Hawkeye; none have been delivered yet. Even when these planes are delivered, their maneuverability will make them less vulnerable to attack than fixed ground radar systems.

THE SAUDI THREAT TO ISRAEL

AIPAC Memorandum

"Saudi Arabia is now constructing a major airbase at Tabuq -- only minutes flying time from Israel's Red Sea port of Eilat. Similar military preparations are underway elsewhere. Saudi leaders have pledged to use their military equipment against Israel and are coordinating military planning and training with Egypt, Jordan and Syria, sometimes in violation of US law.

"...In addition, the civil airfields at Gurayat and Turayf (250 and 300 miles, respectively, from central Sinai) are being expanded for military use. F-15s will be able to operate in a war environment from all three airfields.

"...The New York Daily News reported on November 9, 1975, that at least one squadron of Saudi F-5s had been deployed in Syria and had taken part in the exercises there. The press also reported on November 11, 1975, that a number of Saudi pilots and aircraft had arrived in Jordan. In 1975, the State Department repeatedly protested to the Saudi government that Egyptian pilots were being trained on the US-supplied F-5E aircraft in violation of US law. Yet in the past two years, and despite American protests, there have been reports that a significant number of Egyptian pilots have become qualified on the F-5."

Department of State Comments

Tabuq, long one of Saudi Arabia's army camps, was redeveloped in 1972 to house infantry elements, the French armor school, the airborne school, a basic training center and air defense units. Family housing is now being constructed as part of an overall effort to improve the standard of living of the military.

The Saudi air base at Tabuq is an expansion of the civilian airport which has been used by the civil airline since the early 1960s. In 1974, a British firm completed additional facilities which permit support for a squadron of Lightning interceptors. These facilities would not support the stationing of F-15 aircraft. Saudi military planning stresses dispersal of defensive air and ground units throughout the Kingdom with concentration in the Dhahran area (to protect the oil facilities); at Taif to defend the Mecca-Medina-Jidda complex; and at Khamis Mushait to defend the southern border. In present Saudi planning only these three sites will have the extensive facilities required to support the stationing of advanced aircraft; equipping other airfields to support the F-15 would be a major undertaking requiring US cooperation.

Asphalt airstrips have been constructed near Turayf and Gurayat to replace dirt strips. Runway improvements at these two locations are part of a country-wide Saudi program to improve civil aviation and have no direct military application other than the general usefulness of any runway for emergency landings. There are no military support facilities at Turayf or Gurayat and without them fighter aircraft cannot effectively operate from either airstrip.

Saudi Arabia is fully aware of its obligations not to transfer US equipment supplied under foreign military sales without US permission.

The Saudi army has never played a significant role in an Arab-Israeli war. During the 1973 war, a Saudi army brigade was stationed in Syria in a reserve position; this unit was engaged in one minor contact with Israel forces.

Saudi forces, wholly under Saudi control, did participate in brief maneuvers in Syria in 1975. No Saudi aircraft have ever been stationed in either Jordan or Syria nor are there currently any other Saudi forces in either country.

A few Egyptian pilots received familiarization training on Saudi Lightning aircraft prior to the 1973 war; no Lightnings were ever transferred to Egypt.

In 1975, six Egyptian pilots received orientation training in Saudi F-5s while nine Egyptian maintenance officers attended an English language course in Saudi Arabia. This

training was terminated after two months, and since then no Egyptian pilots or maintenance crews have been trained.

The Saudis are aware that since 1976, US law prohibits training of third-country nationals on US-origin equipment without our prior consent. Any such intention to consent would have to be notified to Congress pursuant to Section 3 of the Arms Export Control Act.

We are unaware of any current Saudi military training with Egypt, Jordan and Syria. We are unaware of any violation of US law with regard to any aspect of our military relationship with Saudi Arabia.

WHO THREATENS SAUDI ARABIA?

AIPAC Memorandum

"An attack from Iraq is unlikely, and F-5Es and Improved Hawk anti-aircraft missiles already in Saudi Arabia would* provide defense. Iraq is deterred by its strained relations with Syria, by hundreds of miles of desert and by Iran. The Saudis are not likely to assume a direct military role in northeast Africa and an attack from Iran is unlikely. More likely is an internal coup against the monarchy leading to the F-15s falling into radical hands."

Department of State Comments

Saudi Arabia has a history of ideological and political dispute with Iraq, a country which is heavily armed with Soviet-supplied weaponry. Saudi F-5s and I-Hawk SAM air defenses could be overcome by a determined attack from Iraq with its advanced fighter bombers and stronger armed forces. Although excellent for a close-in air defense role, the Saudi F-5s are primarily intended by them for air support for ground and naval forces. The F-5 does not have the endurance, range, all-weather capability, or other air superiority characteristics to counter the threat posed by the modern fighter-bombers in the Iraqi inventory.

Saudi Arabia fought a border war with the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen in 1969 and engaged in further combat with PDRY forces in 1974 and 1976.

In 1963 Saudi Arabia was bombed by Egyptian aircraft supporting revolution in the Yemen Arab Republic. On the basis of recent history, Saudi defense planning must consider the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen as a serious, if limited, potential threat.

We agree that an attack on Saudi Arabia by Iran is unlikely, cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Iran in the face of a common threat is a more likely contingency. But Saudi Arabia cannot rely wholly on Iran or other neighbors for its own defense.

Saudi Arabia has been one of the most politically stable countries in the Middle East during the decades since World War II.

ISRAEL'S F-15s

AIPAC Memorandum

"...America's aim of assuring Israel's security will be directly undermined by an F-15 sale to Saudi Arabia, whose planes with long-range lethal missiles could neutralize Israel's F-15s on a one-to-one basis and pose an unprecedented threat to Israeli bases and cities."

Department of State Comments

The combat experience and high levels of performance of Israel's airmen are well established. Saudi air crews have not had comparable combat experience.

The F-15 is primarily an air defense system with only limited capability for ground strikes. The aircraft would not pose "an unprecedented threat to Israeli bases and cities."

Israel is also acquiring F-16s as well as F-15s and holds a large inventory of Mirage, A-4, F-4, and Kfir aircraft. A "one-to-one" comparison of Saudi and Israeli F-15 capability is unwarranted.

US POLICY FORMULATION

AIPAC Memorandum

"...the US Air Force reportedly promoted an F-15 sale to amortize cost overruns. The Arms Control and Disarmament

Agency opposed the sale, as did the Defense Department's Office of Program Analysis and Evaluation.

"The General Accounting Office had sharp reservations ...

"Although an advanced interceptor was committed by the previous Administration, the sale of this particular aircraft need not go through for this reason alone. In fact, such a sale is contrary to recent Presidential Review Memorandum-12 restricting US arms sales."

Department of State Comments

Following a USAF survey of Saudi military requirements in 1974 which recommended that the aging Lightning aircraft be replaced, the Saudis received briefings on four US aircraft, the F-14, F-15, F-16, and F-18. The Saudis followed up with visits to plants. After careful consideration the Saudis made their own decision. No attempt was made to influence their choice.

The GAO did not express "sharp reservations" and did not note that F-5Es had fulfilled Saudi defense needs. The GAO noted that there are no "physical controls" on US equipment after a sale; this is the case in every other country to which the US sells defense articles. US personnel in Saudi Arabia and US intelligence organizations are alert to any violation of US law. If any occurred it would be reported and acted upon promptly.

Executive Branch procedures for reviewing foreign military sales have been carefully followed in the case of the proposal to sell F-15s to Saudi Arabia. ACDA and DOD's Office of Program Analysis and Evaluation expressed views which were taken into account in the decision-making process. The proposal for the sale was carefully considered under the provisions of the Administration's arms transfer policy and found to be consistent with those provisions.

THE EFFECT ON PEACE PROSPECTS

AIPAC Memorandum

"The F-15 would encourage the Arab states to seek military solutions and undercut negotiations. Saudi diplomatic policies to date have not been sufficiently forthcoming to justify an F-15 sale. Saudi oil "moderation" is also a myth since its

oil policies have actually been self-serving and damaging to the West. Quadrupling of oil prices is undeserving of a reward. Finally, if Saudi-US friendship hinges on the sale of F-15s, then the basis of this friendship requires re-evaluation."

Department of State Comments

Denial of F-15 aircraft to Saudi Arabia would undermine Saudi confidence in our reliability as a major power fundamentally concerned with Saudi security. Such confidence is an essential element in a relationship fostering Saudi cooperation with the US in a wide spectrum of common concerns, including Saudi backing for a just and lasting peace settlement through negotiations between the confrontation states and Israel.

The Arab confrontation states do not look to Saudi military assistance, but to Saudi financial and diplomatic support. We believe it unlikely that the confrontation states would adopt a policy of seeking "military solutions" because Saudi Arabia acquired the F-15.

Saudi moderation on oil prices in the past couple of years is a matter of record. Saudi leadership in seeking restraint has resulted in current prices probably 20% lower than most members of OPEC would have wished. At current values, each five percent increase in oil price raises the world's oil bill by $6 billion and the US oil bill by $1.5 billion.

The Western world has relied on Saudi Arabia to produce at levels well beyond the needs of the Saudi domestic economy. Saudi willingness to produce at these levels has been motivated in part by a US-Saudi relationship based on mutual confidence.